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Escapes

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HAVENS | Lewisburg, W. Va.

Kayaking and Martinis: An Alleghenies Getaway

By AMY GUNDERSON

CALL it a country town with a cosmopolitan edge.

The town is Lewisburg, which is tucked into the foothills of the Allegheny mountains in southern West Virginia. It's a place where you can start the day kayaking down the Greenbrier River and end it listening to a jazz concert. An afternoon spent browsing the art galleries that line the historic downtown can be capped off with fly-fishing at twilight.

Lewisburg is decidedly less flashy and formal than its neighbor, the Greenbrier resort in White Sulphur Springs, where dinnertime dress codes and golf tee times reign. But it is drawing second-home owners to its boundless outdoor activities and to property prices a rung lower than those in other Southern mountain communities.

When Warren Brams, a lawyer in West Palm Beach, Fla., looked for a vacation home last year, he visited Lewisburg and was surprised by what he found. "It's an artsy town," Mr. Brams said. "Look at the number of galleries and nice restaurants. What's even more impressive is the performers that come here. There's chamber music. I wanted something that was peaceful, pretty and accessible to all the activities, like skiing and rafting. I really didn't expect to find a place with all those natural attributes and a sophisticated community."

Last fall, Mr. Brams bought a 2,600-square-foot three-bedroom house with two porches and two ponds on 17 acres. The remote location, he said, was a big attraction. "I can't see any other houses from my house, or any lights," he said. "There is a postcard in town of West Virginia at night. It's a black laminated card."

The Scene

Washington Street in downtown Lewisburg is a charming stretch that includes



Stephanie Klein-Davis for The New York Times

WHAT CROWDS? A canoe on the Greenbrier River at Lewisburg, W. Va., an area that has been discovered by vacation-home buyers.

art galleries, restaurants and the requisite outfitters' shop with kayaks in the window. There are two theaters, including the imposing Carnegie Hall, built by Andrew Carnegie in 1902 as an arts center for a women's school. It is now a place for everything from Shakespeare to cowboy poetry readings. At the Greenbrier Valley Theater, the schedule might include a musical comedy, a jazz orchestra or a local bluegrass band.

History also envelops the town. A Civil War-era cemetery sits off one end of the main street. The General Lewis Inn, whose building dates in part from 1834, is at the opposite end of downtown.

But it's not all about nostalgia, even for those living in the middle of history. "I'm a block from the martini bar and four blocks from the best restaurant in town,

Julian's," said Theresa Thompson, a New Yorker who splits her time between Manhattan and Lewisburg, where her house dates to 1810 and is a stop on the town's historical walking tour.

Outside of downtown, it's all about nature. The Greenbrier River cuts through Greenbrier County with a 77-mile trail alongside for hikers, mountain bikers and horseback riders. Fly-fishers come out in the spring, along with bird watchers. Summer brings kayaks and canoes to the river, and winter means skiing at Snowshoe Mountain, an hour's drive away.

It was the outdoors that attracted Steve Atkinson to Lewisburg. "The draw for me was the Greenbrier River," said Mr. Atkinson, who lives in Madison, Wis., and owns land near the Greenbrier Riv-

er as well as a house five blocks from downtown. "As a kid, I spent time playing in that river."

His days are often spent biking or walking the Greenbrier River Trail. "You can be on that for half a day," he said, "and not see another person."

Pros

Outdoor activities are abundant and accessible. The downtown is compact, walkable and filled with shops and restaurants.

Cons

Airline service is limited, especially in the winter. The seasonal rental market is not strong; owners in search of help with their second-home mortgages may have trouble renting out houses.

The Real Estate Market

House prices in Lewisburg and the surrounding communities vary widely. "You can buy a camp on the Greenbrier River for \$65,000, or you can go up to \$8 million farms with several homes, a pool and all the amenities," said Jane Scott of Old Spruce Realty.

The high end is dominated by gated developments like the Greenbrier Sporting Club, on the grounds of the Greenbrier resort in adjacent White Sulphur Springs, and the Retreat, a new community 10 minutes from downtown. Both developments feature multiple-acre parcels chiseled on the ridges of mountains and a well-heeled country life complete with polished clubhouses, spas and outdoor-oriented concierge services that can arrange rafting trips, teach you to fly-fish or plot out a day hike.

Lots at the Greenbrier, which has a private golf course, start at \$400,000 and can easily exceed \$1 million for an acre. The least expensive house on the market is listed at \$1.4 million.

In April, the Retreat released a second phase of homesites starting at \$139,000.

Lots range from one to eight acres and have views stretching across the Greenbrier Valley. The Retreat's mountaintop clubhouse will have an infinity-edge swimming pool, a spa and a grotto spa when completed this summer.

Activity at the Greenbrier Sporting Club is driving some sales in Lewisburg, where house prices are lower and it is still possible to find an acre of land within 15 minutes of downtown for \$10,000.

"The Sporting Club is bringing people into the area," said Bobbie Jackson, an agent with ReMax Vision Quest. "They like the lifestyle and activities at the Sporting Club so they will buy a lot there, but then they'll buy a house in Lewisburg."

Henny and Bob Rausenberger bought several lots at the Greenbrier Sporting Club to build speculative houses and, someday, a home for themselves. In the meantime, they split their time between Williamsburg, Va., and a 130-year-old four-bedroom house just off the main street in Lewisburg.

While Ms. Rausenberger takes full advantage of being a lot owner at the Sporting Club ("I golf there; I eat there; I work out there," she said), she also relishes living downtown where everything is just steps away from her front door. "I can walk everywhere," she said. "Lewisburg is a gem."

Outside the downtown area, it is possible to buy acres that provide real seclusion. Resales of lots at Anthony Village, a subdivision with a mile-and-a-half frontage along the Greenbrier River 10 miles north of Lewisburg, have gone for \$70,000 to \$90,000 over the last year, and houses there are appraised at more than \$400,000.

After years of sweating out the summers in Florida and searching for a country retreat in several North Carolina mountain towns, Terry Burdette and his wife, Susan, bought a 22-acre farm just outside Lewisburg last year for \$285,000. "This 22 acres in Carolina would have come close to \$1 million,"

LAY OF THE LAND

POPULATION 3,624.

SIZE 4 square miles.

WHO'S BUYING Floridians turned off by real estate prices in North Carolina mountain towns and visitors from Virginia, Ohio and other West Virginia towns who can drive to Lewisburg within four hours.

GETTING THERE In mid-April, US Airways started direct seasonal service from La Guardia International Airport in New York and flies to Lewisburg year round from Charlotte, N.C.; Pittsburgh; and Washington Dulles International Airport. Atlantic Southeast Airlines, a Delta carrier, has flights out of Atlanta. Lewisburg is 260 miles from Washington.

WHILE YOU'RE LOOKING Rooms at the General Lewis Inn (301 East Washington Street, 304-645-2600; www.generallewisinn.com) in downtown Lewisburg start at \$140 a night for double occupancy. Part of the inn dates to 1834 and the grounds were a site of a Civil War battle in 1862. For even more opulence, head to the 803-room Greenbrier (300 West Main Street, White Sulphur Springs; 800-453-4858; www.greenbrier.com), where weekend rates start at \$417 a night.

said Mr. Burdette, who lives in Orlando and plans to visit Lewisburg several weeks each season.

The property has a three-bedroom, 2,500-square-foot log house with a great room and a gas fireplace, 10 acres of pasture and a 40-by-50-foot barn that houses a neighbor's classic car collection.

"He cuts my grass when I'm not here, and I keep his cars," Mr. Burdette said. "That's how the barter system works in West Virginia."